

Schwinn lightweight bicycles history

Raleigh D. from Kansas wrote me an email to compliment me on my website and offer more information on the history of Schwinn lightweight ten-speed bicycles such as my Sportabout. He has worked in several bicycle shops, and one of the shops he managed was an actual Schwinn dealership. Most of what he knows he learned by researching for himself. The information that follows comes from a series of emails he sent me in mid-April 2009. I have edited and posted this content with his permission.

Yes, the Schwinn Sportabout is a forgotten bicycle. Those are the most fun! It's those odd little offshoots from the timeline, those odd branches of the family tree, which are the most interesting! Your BEST writing, on the subject of Schwinn Sportabouts, was what you wrote on the [Lynn's Schwinn](#) page! However, you're skipping an important step in history – the Schwinn Suburban!

The first few years of derailleurs on Schwinn – 1959-1963 – were very confusing. 1964 was the first year of the fairly stable “classic” Schwinn with derailleurs. Let's ignore the handmade Schwinn. Let's ignore the Paramounts. Let's ignore the different fillet-brazed models. There were even a few semi-handmade models, but the last of that was gone by 1963. That leaves the mass-produced models, the factory-made Schwinn, the “Electro-Forged” Schwinn, the mass-produced Schwinn “Lightweights” with derailleurs.

For 1964

- Sierra \$90
- Continental \$80
- Varsity \$67
- Collegiate \$57

The model above the Continental died away quickly. Whether it was called a Sierra or a Super Continental, it disappeared. For some reason, everybody forgets about the Collegiate, even though it was made for decades! That leaves the Continental and the Varsity. The cute name for this whole group is “Varsinental.” I'm ashamed to admit, I love that name (which means I love your name, “Sportinental”!)

What's the difference between Varsity and Continental?

1. The front fork.
2. The stem and handlebar.
3. The brakes.
4. The hubs.
5. The pedals.

The details of hubs and pedals are confusing, and off the main subject. The stem and handlebar are easy: Steel or Aluminum. The brakes seem clear: simple side-pulls or fashionable center-pulls. So, that leaves the BIG difference: the front fork! A tubular front fork means Continental, until 1970. Enter the Schwinn Suburban! It was intended to be ALMOST a Continental, but with upright handlebar, and fenders. In the beginning the Suburban even had its own aluminum stem!

1970 Suburban

- Tubular Front Fork
- Aluminum Stem
- Aluminum High-Flange Hubs, with bolt-on axles

So from 1970, through the crazy peak “Bicycle-Boom” year of 1972, until 1975: a tubular front fork meant EITHER a Continental or a Suburban. And was that front fork important? As you pointed out, the tubular front fork is stronger. You also pointed out that it changes the ride and handling. The tubular front fork is stiffer where it should be (steering), and more resilient where it should be (road bumps). But another BIG difference is: Less Weight! The tubular front fork is stronger, gives better handling, gives a better ride and weighs almost half a pound LESS! (last time I weighed Schwinn forks, difference was 191 grams = 0.42 pounds!) Outstanding!

In 1975 things began to get confusing, and quickly became more confusing.

Schwinn, Tubular Front Fork

- 1960... Continental
- 1970... Suburban
- 1975... Sprint, began as a Continental with a shorter wheelbase.
- 1977... Sportabout and Runabout
- 1979... Caliente
- 1982-1983 made the last of the “Chicago Schwinn”.

eBay as a source of information

I keep thinking about the fact that eBay is the ultimate visual encyclopedia! But, you can NOT trust what anyone says about the items they are selling! Some eBay photos should be preserved by the Smithsonian as national treasures, seriously. But I constantly see honest people repeating nonsense that they believe is true about the items they are trying to sell. When I spend time on eBay, it hurts me to see some of those fine photos being used once, and then lost and gone forever. It also hurts me to see the spread of misinformation.

About Schwinn bicycles, if they give the serial number, then we all know the date the frame was made, without doubt. Then all of the details have only one remaining question: is that component part original, or a replacement? If we know the actual date, and if the parts are almost certainly original, then eBay is an incredible source of information! Just ignore what the sellers put in the descriptions, unless you already know for CERTAIN about whatever it is they are writing or unless they are one of the rare folks who actually KNOW what they're talking about.

By the way, I have made SO MANY mistakes of my own. I've had tons of wrong ideas! I've learned so much about Schwinn bicycles in the past ten years. There were some surprises! I thought I knew stuff, but many things that I learned as accepted facts turned out to be wrong-wrong-wrong. When I've had my hands on the actual pieces of metal, and then taken the time to actually look, and measure, and look again...I've learned a few things! And some of the “experts” know the real facts so much better than other “experts”! I've been straightened out quite a

few times. I hang my head. I shuffle my feet in embarrassment. I've had my oops moments.

Schwinn catalogs as a source of information

Here's one for ya! This is just one easy example of things that well-informed and well-educated people accept as fact. We can now browse through the scanned pages of old Schwinn catalogs on the Internet. We can look at old "Consumer Catalogs," and sometimes we can even look at old "Dealer Catalogs." Some folks have small collections of old Schwinn catalogs that they can leaf through, Actual Schwinn Catalogs! But, don't trust them.

The problem? The photos for those catalogs were taken in the Spring or in the early Summer of the year BEFORE! Who knows when the words were finalized? The catalogs were actually printed many months before they were handed out. By the time the catalogs were actually being used by the customers, in the "year" of the catalog, things had changed! Color choices very definitely were changed from what is listed in the consumer catalogs. That happened fairly regularly. It was common for color choices to be different from what was listed in the catalog. Less common were equipment changes, but those happened too! And whole bicycles? Yes, whole bicycles. There were definitely whole bicycles available but not listed in catalogs, and also listed bicycles not actually available! And Schwinn catalogs were much better than most catalogs!!!

Living memories as a source of information

As the people who actually worked in the factories, and in the offices, and in the warehouses, and as traveling sales representatives, and in the retail shops...as these people pass away and as their memories are lost more and more things become questions that can never be fully answered. History. It's a constant game of puzzle pieces and mysterious clues! Real History is a very fun game, and the way to win is to discover actual truth! Cool!